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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development and implementation of a culture-based literature program to improve the reading skills and understanding of minority cultures in students with mild disabilities. Steps in developing such a whole language approach program include: (1) identifying the cultural groups to be studied; (2) choosing both fiction and non-fiction books which reflect the groups in a realistic manner; (3) self education by the teacher on the cultures of the groups to be studied; (4) and application of appropriate reading activities involving assessing students' prior knowledge, guiding student reading, and evaluating attitude changes. (Seven references) (DB)

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LEARNING ABOUT MINORITY CULTURES AND IMPROVING READING SKILLS THROUGH THE USE OF GOOD LITERATURE

Paper presented at the 70th CEC Annual Convention
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LEARNING ABOUT MINORITY CULTURES AND IMPROVING READING SKILLS THROUGH THE USE OF GOOD LITERATURE

by

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Reading impacts most curriculum areas and children who are unable to effectively acquire this skill are significantly disadvantaged in all aspects of their lives. Many students with mild impairments are in this position and have not been successful in meeting basic expectations in reading skills. Literature-based reading programs can be used to optimize chances for acquisition of these skills, and at the same time create the opportunity to teach an awareness and appreciation of our culturally diverse population.

Historically, reading instruction has been based on literature. However, in too many instances, literature has been condensed, adapted, and in other ways altered for use in basal readers. Usually the vocabulary has been changed to make it easier to read. As a result, the beauty of our language and sometimes the meaning of the text itself have suffered. There is now a renewed interest in the used of unadulterated literature as a tool for building children's reading proficiency. Increasing numbers of teachers are using literature as the vehicle for developing good readers who not only can comprehend what they read but also can develop a life-long interest in reading. Literature used in such a manner has typically been a component of whole language reading programs which reflect an integrative approach to curriculum. Since 1987, the State Department of Education in California has mandated the use of literature in all grades (Lipka and Gaskill, 1992). New York, Georgia, Virginia, Arizona, New Mexico, and Michigan are also beginning to explore instituting literature-based reading programs (Simon, 1988).

A literature-based reading program is rooted in the whole language approach which has children learning from whole language units, such as songs, poems, and simple stories, while using four modes of learning: hearing, speaking, reading, and writing. Reading skills and vocabulary are learned in context as opposed to a basic skills approach in which children learn isolated skills such as letter sounds and must transfer this knowledge in

order to unlock the meaning of the text. The amount of transfer from skillpacks and worksheets to the actual process of reading is questionable. Letters and sounds are abstract concepts for children in the latter part of pre-operational or early part of concrete operational stages of cognitive development.

Literature-based reading programs provide many advantages. First they provide the children with a sense of pleasure from their interaction with the printed word; reading stories, poems, and other such literary genre become fun for children. Secondly, literature-based reading programs can stimulate higher level thinking skills and develop imagination. Children can be encouraged to predict events, characters' actions, as well as to create different endings for stories or chapters. Literature-based reading programs provide children with universal themes which describe the human experience and can assist children in seeing the commonalities among all humans. Literature provides factual information about a variety of topics as well as providing a strong language model which children can emulate. Finally, literature can explore and extend understandings critical to life in a culturally diverse society. It is this latter use of literature that affords untapped and exciting potential.

The United States is in the midst of a shift in the racial composition of its population which has implications for all aspects of public education including the delivery of special education services. Interestingly, immigration patterns and differential fertility rates among various groups are significantly changing the nation's cultural composition. According to the 1980 census, 50 million of the 240 million American were African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic, Asian, or other culturally diverse groups (News Digest, 1987). Demographic projections indicate that shortly after the turn of the century, one out of every three Americans will be nonwhite (Education Week, 1986). This rising cultural diversity is reflected in the population of our schools. As an example, California, New Mexico, and Mississippi now have a "majority of Minorities" in their elementary schools (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990). Forty-six percent of the students in Texas are African Americans and Hispanic. In the 25 largest

school systems in the United States, the majority of students are minorities (Hodgkinson, 1986).

In the past, the "melting pot" concept was the commonly held view with regards to American society. According to this view, members of cultural and ethnic groups were blended together to form a standard American prototype. Now, the fallacy of the "melting pot" concept has been recognized. American society is now seen as more a garden salad tossed with the same salad dressing, culturally diverse but still a discrete entity within a common community. Accordingly, cultural and ethnic groups maintain their cultural distinctions while simultaneously contributing to the general flavor of America. This revised view implies that there is no one model American. It underlines the importance for a better understanding of the impact of culture on individuals and families and the need for children to interface with literature written about culturally diverse groups.

As you would expect, special education programs also include increasing numbers of children from culturally diverse backgrounds. As a result, the purpose of special education in today's society must be to provide an individualized education to meet the needs of children with impairments from culturally diverse backgrounds. At issue is how to reach children in all their needs and diversity. Specific strategies are required to achieve this objective within the context of cultural diversity. Children should be taught with consideration for their cultural heritage and language preference. The use of literature can be an instructional tool for use in assisting children with handicaps in the classroom to not only better their reading, but at the same time to build acceptance and respect for the cultures in our pluralistic society. Children's literature written on the subject of cultural diversity opens up new and wonderful worlds of reading for all students. It is an instructional technique that capitalizes on children's diversity as a learning resource for all members of a classroom or a school community.

Bishop (1987) described several benefits in the use of good literature in promoting cultural understanding.

1. It can show how all of us are connected to each other through our needs, our emotions, and our desires. Such an understanding of our common humanity is an awesome weapon against any forces poised to divide us from one another.

2. It can help us appreciate, understand, and even celebrate the differences that make each cultural group special and that enrich the larger society.

3. It can promote an understanding of the effects of social issues and forces on the lives of average individuals.

4. It can help children understand the potentially devastating effects of negative forces on everyday lives.

To the above listing can be added the use of literature to promote reading proficiency. It is important for educators to develop an awareness and appreciation of cultural differences, and then they must translate this knowledge into ethnically competent instructional practices designed to build children's reading skills.

There are several steps to implementing a culture-based literature program. These steps include development and reading strategies.

Development

Development of a culturally-based literature program is of utmost importance.

The initial step involves identifying the cultural groups to be studied. The next step involves choosing fiction and non-fiction books for the program which will reflect the groups in a realistic manner. It is important to use care in selecting appropriate children's literature which will be used in the program. During the middle and late 1970's, books about culturally diverse groups became more plentiful. Most of these books projected positive and

authentic images of the groups. There were, however, some exceptions. Teachers should review books carefully to ascertain the type of messages being conveyed through words and pictures regarding the groups. The teacher must also investigate the numerous books which would be appropriate for their purposes that have been awarded Newberry and Caldicott awards.

After the cultural groups to be studied and the books reflecting these groups have been selected, the teacher, if not already well informed, must become well-versed in the history, the legends, the characteristics, the family life, and the traditions of these groups. This information can be obtained through background reading, through direct conversation with children, and/or through conversations with adult representatives of the groups, through research of the country of origin, family life, the historical and current leaders, beliefs, religion, accomplishments and aspirations, etc. Through this process, a respect, understanding, and appreciation of the material to be taught can be developed. Once equipped with this information, the process of building reading skills and cultural interaction begins.

Reading

Reading activities include assessing prior knowledge, prediction, and motivating students. It is essential that good reading strategies, such as KWL (what we already Know, what we Want to learn, what we Learned), DRTA (Directed Reading-Teaching Activity), developing questions which encourage higher level thinking skills, setting objectives and assessing as to whether the students attained them, will be used. There are certain strategies which should be emphasized when teaching a cultural-based literature program. Story mapping completed during reading can be used to familiarize children with the literary elements of the story, such as setting, characterization, events of the story, and its resolution. Stopping the reading to predict is important to develop active, involved readers. Both skills can be used to analyze the characters and to see the relationships to the cultural group.

Assess prior knowledge of the children with regards to the cultural group represented by each book. In this case, the students' prior knowledge would include their knowledge about the cultural group, their familiarity with the language and illustrations used in the text, their awareness of the traditions and legends, and their knowledge of the origins of the group. Map work, anticipation guides, discussion, pictures, films, guest speakers from the cultural group, foods, music all can be used to familiarize the students with the culture and motivate them to read. A change in attitude of the students before and after the reading can be measured by having the students rank statements about the group or individual before reading and then the same statements after reading about the group or individual and compare the two.

Teachers are engineers of culturally-based interactions in their classrooms. Teachers must be able to recognize the potential of literature in helping children recognize similarities and differences between all cultures. Figure 1 summarizes the components of a culturally-based literature approach. [INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE] As teachers develop an awareness and appreciation of cultural groups, they can implement their knowledge by using it to enhance their reading program. Not only will the students improve their reading skills, but they also will expand their skills for positive interactions in an increasingly culturally diverse world and realize that all characters in the literature were cut from the same mold.

CULTURALLY BASED LITERATURE APPROACH

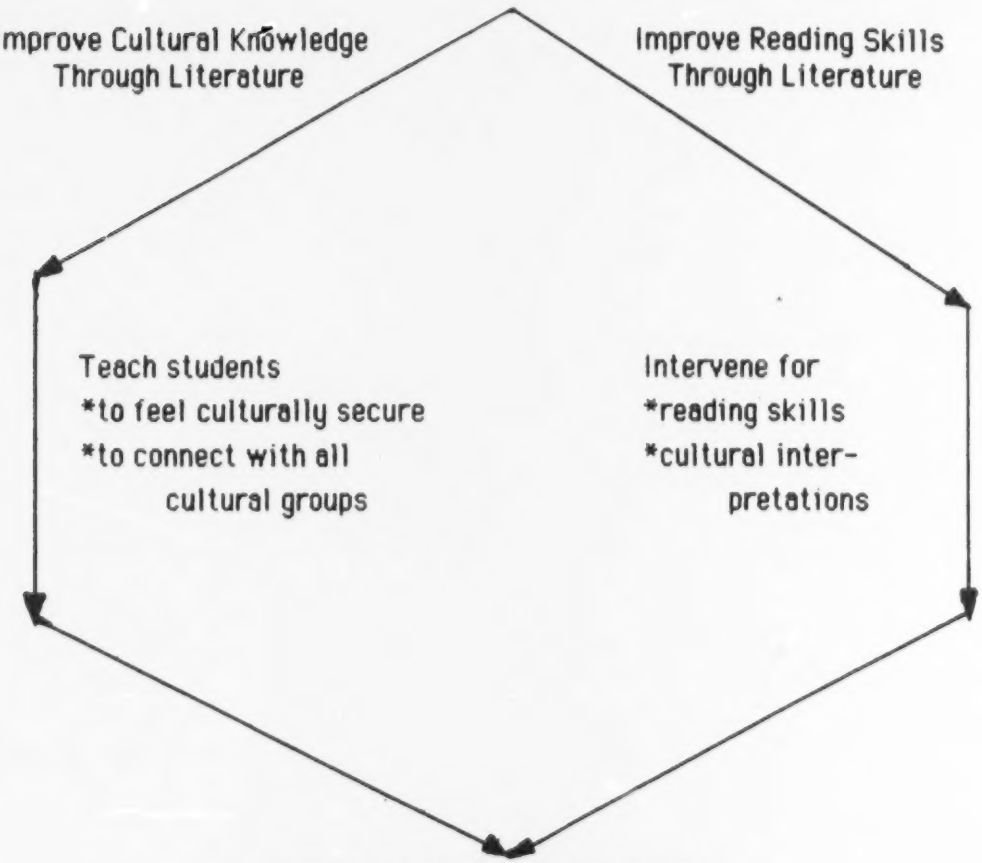

FIGURE 1

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